

## Happiness

Take a moment right now—make a deliberate choice to give this your full attention—to imagine yourself engaged in one of the following activities:

walking in the woods, cuddling a child, burying your nose in the petals of a fragrant flower, having a conversation with a good friend, listening to your favorite music, savoring a delicious chocolate truffle, completing a challenging task, helping someone solve a problem.

In your imagination, immerse yourself completely in this experience. Take note of how you feel, physically and emotionally, and what your thoughts are, especially what you think about yourself, the world and life itself. If you were to label this experience with a single word, perhaps that word might be happiness.

Happiness occurs when we are in harmony with ourselves and the world, at one with what we are doing, feeling and thinking, present to every sensation. We experience a connectedness with ourselves and others and with life itself. In this absolute being-in-the-moment, we do not waste any thoughts or energy on regrets for the past or fears for the future. We are fully alive. We experience simultaneously a deep sense of security and complete openness and vulnerability, a state of surrender. As someone who likes to feel in control, I have always felt threatened by the word “surrender”, but surrender here is not a loss but a gain. We recognize that we are part of a much greater whole, and are filled with wonder, awe, humility and gratitude for the miracle of life.

When we are happy, we are in a desire-less state, completely content with what is. This is the state that mystics and monks throughout history have striven for. Achieving this state does not depend on material prosperity. Indeed, monks often deliberately eschew material comforts. This independence of happiness from economic status is borne out by research that shows that despite dramatic increases in material wealth, quality of work and health over the past 50 years in the Western world, people are no happier. Economist Richard Layard presents extensive research in his book, *Happiness*, demonstrating that beyond an income level that allows us to meet our basic survival needs, wealth does not make us happier. In the West, depression causes more misery than poverty: depression is the fastest growing illness and is predicted to become the second largest killer after heart disease by the year 2020. According to the World Health Organization, mental illness and addiction cause nearly half of all the disability in the US and the EU.

One reason that things don't make us happy is a phenomenon called “the hedonic treadmill”. As soon as we acquire something that we yearn for, e.g. a certain luxury product which we expect will make us happier, the thrill wears off and what was once a longed-for-luxury becomes reclassified in our minds as a basic need, setting off the yearning process once again. We may get a momentary kick from the buying process, but identification with our possessions leads to dissatisfaction. This is the mechanism of scarcity thinking: we never have (or are) enough. Our survival instinct inclines us toward scarcity as a default frame for seeing the world. We need to actively overcome this with our conscious reflection and choices in order to move ourselves to abundance thinking and therefore open ourselves to happiness. Rivalry with those who have more than us triggers frustration, aggression, a sense of our own inadequacy, a tendency towards addictive behavior to comfort poor me, a narrowing of the self.

We do not instinctively compare ourselves with those who have less, but when we do, that comparison triggers compassion, gratitude and generosity, a desire to serve mankind, an expanding of the self. MRIs performed on Buddhist monks have shown that their meditation practices—in particular those cultivating compassion—activate the area of the brain where happiness resides. In addition, in contrast to novice meditators, the monks' brains showed stronger connections between the frontal lobes and the brain network linked to empathy and maternal love. They have changed their brains' wiring to forge a stronger connection between thoughts and feelings. This and other research proves scientifically what I have long been convinced of: our thoughts change our brains and we can influence our own happiness.

Layard cites seven major factors affecting happiness: family relationships, financial security, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom and personal values. In addition to the hedonic treadmill, he identifies several social and cultural trends over the last 50 years that have negatively impacted our level of happiness. These include: the belief that most people aren't trustworthy, the lack or break-up of social relationships, television (content and time spent viewing), the decline in religious belief, rampant individualism.

We are increasingly isolated as the fabric of our society frays into individual strands. Though shopping and television may give us momentary pleasure, neither leads to happiness. Our thoughts (about ourselves, our fellow human beings and life itself), beliefs, choices and actions work together to determine our happiness. We cannot seize or hold onto happiness. Even the happiest people experience sadness. It is immune to a sense of entitlement. The harder we try to grasp it, the more likely it will evade us. We can, however, invite happiness into our lives and cultivate it. Let's look at three ways to do so.

#### **Cultivate an attitude of abundance**

The Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived from 341-270 BC, wrote: "Not what we have but what we enjoy, constitutes our abundance". Contrary to popular belief, Epicurus was not a promoter of luxury, but of enjoyment. Enjoyment comes from conscious appreciation, not compulsive consumption. The Buddhist practice of mindfulness, being intentionally and non-judgmentally aware of one's thoughts and actions in the present moment aims at the same result. Mindfulness can be used both to intensify pleasure, e.g. mindfully eating a piece of chocolate, and also to reduce stress, decrease pain and treat depression. How often are we not really there with what we are doing? We may be multitasking and not really fully attentive to any of the tasks. Another distracter is our inner litany of judgements, e.g. "if only I didn't have to do laundry" or "I shouldn't be taking a break" or "Why do I have to suffer" that eliminates any possibility of enjoying the activity or, as in the case of pain, makes it worse. Practices for cultivating gratitude, such as keeping a gratitude journal or counting our blessings before going to sleep also help us focus on what we have rather than what we lack, directly counteracting scarcity thinking. When we appreciate what we have, less is infinitely more. When we say yes to the circumstances we are in, we embrace life.

#### **Find and follow your purpose**

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of the acclaimed book, *Flow*, distinguishes between pleasure and enjoyment. He asserts that pleasure on its own does not lead to lasting happiness and that optimal experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time. Pleasure satisfies the needs of the body, but does not induce psychological

growth. Enjoyment involves a sense of accomplishment and requires an unusual investment of attention. He defines "flow" as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." In flow, action and awareness merge and we lose consciousness of ourselves during the experience, but as a result we expand the concept of who we are. We become more. Based on his research, he concludes that "the best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we *make* happen". We give our lives meaning when we have a clear purpose and we pursue it actively. Having a sense of purpose enables us to delay gratification and cope with frustration and challenging circumstances. By controlling our inner experience, we determine the quality of our lives.

### **Engage with and give to others**

Beyond the self-transcendence of flow, we can expand our consciousness even further to include our fellow human beings, and even all of mankind. We cannot exist in isolation from other people. Numerous studies have proven that loving relationships lead to better mental and physical health and longer life. In his book, *Love and Survival*, American cardiologist Dean Ornish states: "I am not aware of any other factor in medicine that has a greater impact on our survival than the healing power of love and intimacy. Not diet, not smoking, not exercise, not stress, not genetics, not drugs, not surgery." We neglect relationships to our peril. Epicurus regarded friendship as essential to our well-being, saying that "of all the things that wisdom provides to help one live one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is friendship".

Love follows the law of abundance: it grows as we share it. Having compassion for others and actively helping others powerfully increase happiness and, throughout history, have been essential principles and practices of most religions and spiritual movements. Many people find their life purpose in helping others or making a contribution to society. This is not sacrificing ourselves for others or instrumentalizing others for our gain, but truly unconditional giving, which simultaneously increases our love for ourselves. Doing good has been shown to be an effective treatment for depression. University students in the US participating in happiness courses reported that the most long-lasting happy feelings resulted from acts of selfless kindness. We transcend our limited and limiting self-consciousness through a sense of connectedness to all human beings, in both our humanness and our godliness. Compassion not only keeps us focused on abundance and gratitude, but helps mend the fabric of society by building relationships, community and, ultimately, world peace.

I recommend that we take to heart the words of Norman Vincent Peale, American preacher and author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*:

"Joy increases as you give it, and diminishes as you try to keep it for yourself. In giving it, you will accumulate a deposit of joy greater than you ever believed possible."